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ABSTRACT

This progress report describes a Swedish project which is seeking to develop and test materials for writing practice. Experimental materials focus on the sentence, giving students practice in the formation of more advanced constructions. Emphasis in the control program is on a variety of types of written composition (e.g., narratives, descriptions, summaries, arguments). Seven teachers in six upper secondary schools teach the experimental program in one class each and the control program in one class each. A placebo group of five classes whose teachers are not otherwise involved in the project is also included. Assessment is to be based on writing samples gathered before and after the teaching phase of the experiment. (AA)

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June 1976

Current project

1976:1

Title of project: Writing practice in upper secondary school (STIG)

Project no.: 303

In progress at: Department of Educational and Psychological Research, Malmö School of Education

Project leader: Åke Pettersson

Scientific leader: Ass. Prof. Ebbe Lindell

Purposes

The concluded projects Writing Syntax and Swedish Measurements gave a detailed comparison of the written Swedish of upper secondary school students and professional written Swedish and also of the written Swedish of different merit groups. The present project has two purposes:

- to compile concrete material for writing practice on the basis of the quality measurements which have been ascertained
- to test empirically the effect of this material compared with writing practice of a good traditional variety.

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BACKGROUND

Two research projects

One of our main starting points was provided by the results accruing from two research projects. One of these projects was called Writing Syntax (Skrivsyntax) and involved a highly meticulous comparison of the written Swedish produced by students in grade 3 of upper secondary school and the printed everyday language addressed to an extensive public for purposes of information. Thus the project showed how, if at all, the written language produced by upper secondary students differed from the language which is thought to function effectively in society. The second project, Swedish Measurements (Svenska Mått) started with the assessment by a group comprising three teachers and three newspaper journalists of essays by upper secondary students (151 essays on subjects set in the 1970 standardized achievement test for grade 3). Assessments were then compared with linguistic qualities, e.g. "What are the characteristics of the language used in different merit groups?" and "what linguistic features tend to confer high marks?"

In general terms, the main results of the two studies were as follows.

The language of everyday prose differs considerably from the prose written by upper secondary students. There is also a marked difference of language between the good upper secondary essays and the poor ones.

For the most part, the language of everyday prose differs from upper secondary language in the same way as the language of the good essays differs from that of the weak ones.

Thus we were able to begin our project with the assurance that there are linguistic differences between good and bad upper secondary school prose writing and that, on the whole, the teachers award marks by realistic standards. The teachers standards are geared to real life.

Linguistic results

The task of our project is to translate the main results of the Swedish language projects into concrete teaching material and to find out how that material operates in practice. But what are the linguistic features which are too seldom employed by upper secondary students, especially the weaker of them?

Here is a very brief summary:

1. Nouns, especially verbal nouns and composite nouns
2. Prepositions, adjectives and participles
3. Attributives - both preceding and following
4. Word variation, i.e. a large vocabulary
5. "Unusual" and "long" words (i.e. words not included among the 7,000 commonest and words containing 7 or more letters).

Two more positive qualities can be added to this list:

- Many words, i.e. long essays
- Few language errors.

Features 1-5 are much more closely connected than one might imagine. Notice first that the parts of speech comprise the noun and its satellites: prepositions, adjectives and parti-

ciples are normally associated with nouns. In what types of syntactic components are these four parts of speech required? They are required in subjects, objects and other nominal phrases. But the crucial thing is not to use many subjects, objects etc. but to make them long. A long subject usually has a noun as its main word and often has adjectives, prepositions or participles in its attributive.

If we consider language from the vocabulary point of view, it is easy to understand that nouns are what we need in order to vary and enlarge vocabulary. Most words in a word list are nouns: look up a word list and see for yourself! Word variation presupposes a large number of relatively "long" words, because as a general rule common words are short and uncommon words are long: the reverse would imply a great waste of energy.

How are the results to be interpreted?

It is not sufficient to establish the linguistic qualities which tend to be highly esteemed. The next step must be to interpret the characteristics of language. We will start with these synonymous sentences:

- I heard that there was somebody who screamed that it rent my heart.

- I heard a heart-rending scream.

The first sentence represents, in somewhat caricatured form, the simple, unsophisticated language. The latter represents the sophisticated language. In the first sentence, for example, the noun and its satellites make up only 14 % of the text (my heart). In the second sentence they make up no less than 40 % of the total mass of words (heart-rending scream - in Swedish).

Let us now compare these examples:

- The latter sentence says the same thing in less words and with fewer letters.
- Its contents, therefore, are more concentrated.
- The words used are more varied and the language is more expressive.
- The expression a heart-rending scream is easier to remember, refer to and reason about than the expression somebody screamed so that it rent my heart. Look at this: "He then heard a skidding car, a heart-rending scream and, finally, two dull thuds."

Thus the developed language is characterized by concentration, wealth of content, expressiveness and variation. But a still more important aspect concerns the capacity of abstraction, the ability to form concepts. Language helps us to think by providing us with signs, symbols of our concepts. Naturally, therefore, shorter symbols of our concepts make it easier for us to handle those concepts. We find it easier to cope with a rather complicated description or argument if there are short and convenient symbols available for our concepts. If this argument holds good, developed language stimulates concept formation and the ability to manage concepts easily.

DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The experimental programmeAims and limitations

The principal aim of all writing practice is of course to raise the general standard of written work. Following in the wake of Syntax, the most important detailed aims are therefore to help the students to write with greater concentration, greater wealth of content, greater expression and greater variety. We hope to be able into the bargain to improve their ability to form and handle concepts. But the reader will doubtless realize just as much as we do that these qualities do not cover the whole of writing ability. For example, writing practice has not included any direct efforts on our part to eliminate errors of written language or to make the essays longer.

This limitation of our aspirations is not self-imposed. It is imposed by the practical limits dictated by the scientific testing. The experimental teaching was confined to grade one of a three-year line of upper secondary school. Since not more than 20 lessons (roughly one quarter of the total effective teaching time) could be allotted for written practice, we were forced to cut down heavily on the subject matter.

The goals which Writing Syntax and Swedish Measurements indicated as being essential can probably be achieved in many different ways, but we saw no point in trying out models that were already well known, especially as the results are considered surprising by the majority of teachers of Swedish. We have therefore tried to construct a practice programme which clearly differs from current methods.

Main features of the written practice

We would describe the essentials of the programme as follows.

1. Formulation exercises. To a very great extent we refrain from exercises in the production of complete texts, e.g. certain types of essay writing etc. Instead we go down to basic essentials, to sentence construction, and the students work on isolated sentences. Consequently in examining the students' work the teacher is able to concentrate on a smaller number of aspects at a time. Relatively speaking, this should reduce his work load.

2. Linguistic awareness. We want to help the student to see his own language, to realize that it is made up of parts of speech, clauses and other grammatical units. Grammar must not be just an abstract exercise: the students produce their own structures in speech and writing. Theoretical grammar, the ability to find the units and give them their proper names, must serve as a support for language practice. We believe that this method will have advantages in terms of integration and practical usefulness.

3. Constructive language exercises. Grammar and writing practice are primarily aimed not at the prevention of errors of language but at the formation of more mature and advanced constructions. Thus the practice carries plus signs, not negative ones. We show the students the grammatical relationship between different but equivalent structures. They then practise replacing the simpler, more naive variant with the more advanced one. In generative grammar, reformulations of this kind are termed "stylistic transformations". Generative grammar has been very useful to us all the time. It has helped us to interpret the results, it has shown us the dynamic, constructive side of language and it has

furnished us with concrete practice methods. But of course we do not presuppose a mastery of generative grammar on the part of teachers or students.

4. Work on the student's own language. As part of our aim of linguistic awareness, we try to give the students time - in the course of two lessons - to rewrite their own texts; in doing so they have a free hand, but of course we have no objections to their following the guidelines drawn up during their practice sessions. The idea, then, is for the student to learn to appraise his own use of language in the practical context. It is not enough for him to know that his first formulation can be altered, he must actually be able to alter it.

5. Experience of results. Command of written language is a highly complex ability, but Writing Syntax and Swedish Measurements have now identified a great deal of it. We have tried to pass this knowledge on to the students, because previously they have been notoriously ignorant of the profounder qualities by which assessment is guided: "Why did I only get 3 out of 5? I didn't make all that many mistakes." We have constructed a fairly simple quality index which the students themselves can employ with a minimum of grammatical knowledge. We believe it is important for the students to learn at least partially to "demystify" the command of written language.

This should improve their motivation and awareness, at the same time helping them to understand the teacher's assessment and the difficulties involved in making a fair assessment.

All aspects are not covered

Thus the experimental programme presents a fairly specific model of writing practice. In the project this model is compared with highly systematic and ambitious practice of

different types of written work. The latter model represents current writing practice, and the purpose of course is to compare the effects of two distinct methods. But there is little likelihood of one method being superior to the other in all respects. We expect practical trials to show not only which of the methods should provide the nucleus of writing practice but also the way in which the methods should be combined for the best results. Moreover, there are other aspects of written work which have to be provided for - free expression practice and the study of language errors, for instance. Our draft scheme, therefore, is not to be regarded as a comprehensive written work programme.

The control programme

We have tried our utmost to make the rival programme of written work a formidable competitor. At the same time we felt that this control programme had to be established at the NBE and familiar to teachers. We have therefore composed a well-articulated practice programme of the type recommended by the NBE. Specific suggestions on exercises have been obtained from textbooks.

The emphasis of the control programme is on the writing of narratives, descriptions, summaries and arguments - in other words, on different kinds of written composition.

Student groups

Trials were limited to grade 1 of a three-year line of upper secondary school. Seven teachers in six different upper secondary schools taught the experimental programme in one class each and the control programme in another class each. These programmes occupied 20 lessons, 10 during the autumn and 10 during the spring term.

Thus the experimental population comprised the seven classes, with their various teachers, which bore the closest possible resemblance to the control group. The normalization of the experimental and control groups was based on several background variables:

- average award in grade 9 of elementary school
- Swedish award in grade 9 of elementary school
- a test on parts of speech and clauses
- a doze test in which the students had to supply words or missing parts of words, as in the following example.

In the pre..... sect... we dis...sed fitness.
We were un.... , h.....r, to give any assurance
that physical fitness was a good r.m... against
dis...e or even that it could .e...h.n life.

The distribution of students between different lines of study was also made as uniform as possible.

We gradually came to realize that the control programme was far better planned and far more intense than the writing practice normally provided for grade 1 students. We therefore selected a placebo group a five classes whose average awards from grade 9 of elementary school were fairly comparable to those of the experimental and control groups. The teachers taking the normal group were not involved in the project until the spring term, and they were then asked to go on teaching exactly as usual for the remainder of the school year. We therefore hope that the normal group will provide us with an opportunity of measuring the results of conventional writing practice.

Free written composition test

All the students in the experimental and control groups wrote one essay before and one after the teaching phase. Roughly half of them wrote on the subject "This is how I want to live and work" before the teaching and "This is the kind of school I want" after the teaching. The other half wrote on the same subjects but in reverse order. Stimulus was given in the form of pictures and key phrases.

The normal group, of course, could only take part in the essay test which came after the teaching phase. These students were divided more or less evenly between the two subjects.

Analysis of the tests. Language measurements

All of the essays were punch-carded for computer analysis and notes were recorded concerning a small number of linguistic features:

- change of paragraph
- limit of graphic sentence
- noun
- finite verb in main clause
- finite verb in subsidiary clause.

Linguistic analysis has thus been heavily restricted - for economic reasons - but usage can nonetheless be studied by a long series of measurements, though admittedly these are often approximations.

In terms of reliability and techniques of definition, the language measurements can be classified as follows.

Reliable

1. Analysis-free, e.g. running words, different words, commas
2. Language-marked, e.g. nouns, finite verbs, sentence boundaries
3. Derivatives, e.g. nouns of at least 7 letters, sentences with at least three consecutive subordinate verbs
4. Complete lists of words, e.g. mistakes in words: the 205 commonest words as per Allén, Nusvensk frekvensordbok

Approximate

1. Suffix and prefix measurements, e.g. non-substantives ending in -bar (= -ble) and finite verbs beginning with be-
2. Approximate word lists, e.g. the commonest pronouns, names of occupations.

The suffix and prefix measurements can be made formally reliable by subtracting the exceptions as per the total word list for the material from the measurements obtained.

The measurements can be linguistically classified as follows:

1. Grammatical errors, e.g. mistakes in words, sentences with only finite verbs in subordinate clauses
2. Contextual measurements, e.g. nouns among the first four words of sentences, relatives, length of paragraphs
3. Vocabulary, e.g. words of different kinds, long words, running words

4. Other linguistic measurements, e.g. pronouns, co-ordinating conjunctions, substantives in the genitive, adverbs ending in Sw. -vis (= E. -ly), colloquial idioms

5. Measurements of contents, e.g. words about family and children, words about school environment.

The simple measurements are later used to form larger measurements in the form of totals and ratios.

Background variables

Apart from particulars concerning sex, line of studies etc., there are also a series of other data concerning the students, including particulars concerning social class, average awards and Swedish awards from the spring term of grade 1³ and replies to an attitude questionnaire about Swedish, with special reference to writing practice.

The teachers responsible for the trial activities draw up freely designed reports giving exhaustive answers to certain fixed questions.

Effect measurement

The effect of writing practice is measured in two ways - subjectively and objectively.

1. Subjective measurement implies that a group of eleven experienced upper secondary teachers award marks for one-third of the essays. In this sample one student out of every three is represented by both of his essays, though the "normal students" are only represented by their second essay. When the essays come to the group of judges, they are typewritten and randomly numbered. Each of the teachers award marks on a nine-point scale (1 - 1.5 ... 4 - 4.5 - 5),

making sure that the marks awarded for his 1/11 of the selected essays (usually 78 or 80 in all) conform to the standard distribution pattern. Each of the essays in the sample is judged by three teachers.

2. Objective measurement is based on the linguistic measurements and partly also replies to the questionnaire etc. The Writing Syntax study has already shown us the reasonable targets for several of the linguistic measurements, i.e. the frequencies of the functional prose written by trained professional writers in texts designed for a wide readership.

For other linguistic measurements, e.g. the distribution of content words between different subject sectors, we can utilize data concerning admission points, assessed marks and the actual direction of development between the essay before and the essay after the teaching phase. Thus if the frequency of a particular linguistic measurement undergoes a total increase between the two essays, and if at the same time high frequencies are characteristic of students with high admission points and high assessed marks, it is reasonable to infer that a high frequency of that particular trait of language is a token of quality.

Other measurements

The material will also be used for other investigations besides the comparison of methods. Questions to be studied include the following.

- What does the written language of young upper secondary students look like compared with that of ten-year-olds, thirteen-year-olds and nineteen-year-olds school and with informative everyday written Swedish?

- How does the students' language change from autumn to spring term?
- How does language covary with sex and social class?
- Does more intensive writing practice pay?
- Are imaginative essays better than factual ones?
- What do students write about and what do they think?
- Can writing practice be supported by the teaching of grammar?

TIMETABLE AND INFORMATION

The results of the statistical analysis are expected to appear in April or May 1976. If a grant is forthcoming for a further year's work, we should be able to produce a report during the spring of 1977.

The project has been presented at a large number of study days and other meetings with teachers. On these occasions we have had to content ourselves with describing the background - the results of the Writing Syntax project - and with presenting and commenting on the teaching material.

To the best of our ability, we have also distributed the teaching material and the teacher's guide to quite a large number of teachers, including colleagues in Denmark and Norway.

Later this spring, we will be able to offer those who are interested a published version of the research programme together with the introduction and teacher's guide.

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